

**A local woman (below) strolls through the desolate streets of Djibouti City, Africa, a few miles from Camp Lemonier. Deployed Airmen are taking part in a Combined Joint Task Force — Horn of Africa mission to secure the environment for regional stability. They are also fighting terrorism by winning the hearts and minds of the African people.**



# One Deployment, Two Worlds

*Airmen in Djibouti experience a taste of Africa and the Marine Corps*

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts  
photos by Master Sgt. John Lasky

**W**hen Airman 1st Class Amber Balbach deployed to Camp Lemonier for Combined Joint Task Force — Horn of Africa, she discovered two worlds: one she'd never heard of — Djibouti; and one she had never encountered — the Marine Corps. However, she said the experience was both professionally and personally rewarding.

She deployed to Djibouti, located on the east coast of Africa, along with fellow members of the 823rd RED HORSE Squadron from Hurlburt Field, Fla. Although she was accustomed to Florida's hot and sunny

weather, it didn't prepare her for Djibouti's extreme heat — often topping 140 degrees. She also wasn't prepared for the extreme poverty found just outside the camp's gate, a former French Foreign Legion post that now accommodates about 1,400 service-members, most of them Marines.

But she's glad for the opportunity to be a part of the task force's mission to help stabilize the Horn of Africa region — an area that encompasses seven countries. For the past two years, members of the task force have been busy building and renovating schools, clinics, roads and providing medical treatment to people

and livestock. By doing so, a more stabilized Horn of Africa will be a less likely place for terrorism to take hold. People at Camp Lemonier often refer to what they're doing as fighting terrorism by winning the hearts and minds of the African people.

It's rewarding duty for Airman Balbach, both in helping improve the lives of Africans and in giving her a different perspective of her own life. She lacks many of the creature comforts of home, but now those things didn't seem so important after a few trips downtown to the nearby capital city to pick up a few supplies for her unit. She experienced warm, friendly

people in a nation where life is tough. The average life expectancy for Djiboutians is about 50 years and the annual average salary is about \$450.

"I never envisioned it to be like that," she said.

By comparison, her deployed life at Camp Lemonier is comfortable, living in a air-conditioned tent, even though a trip to the toilet and bathing trailers in the middle of the night means a walk on a sea of gravel. Camp life at Djibouti also offers amenities found at similar camps, such as a base exchange, barber shop, dry cleaners, gift shop and recreation facilities with computers and phones to provide a

**Marine Master Sgt. Rodney Cain** (background) instructs Staff Sgt. Kip MacTaggart (standing) as he puts Staff Sgt. Robert Henshaw to the ground during Marine Corps martial arts training. The two Airmen signed up for the training while deployed to Camp Lemonier. About 50 Airmen live, eat and work alongside more than 1,000 Marines in the area.



chance to communicate with loved ones back home.

By comparison, her unit has brought new life to clinics and schools lacking electricity and running water for toilets. At one school, a RED HORSE member inquired why he didn't see any girls at the school. It was because of a lack of toilets. RED HORSE installed them and the female students soon showed up. It's now a standard item on their checklist to make sure all schools they work at have female facilities.

Unlike some of her counterparts who travel to countries such as Ethiopia, Airman Balbach's job is to take care of administrative duties, so she doesn't get the chance to leave as often as she'd like to. Her interaction has been limited to a few trips downtown, but Airman Balbach enjoys the opportunity to meet the local people who seem supportive of the task force.

"They are the people for us," said Saida Yahya Mohamed, a recent graduate from the University of Djibouti who works at Camp Lemonier as an administrative specialist. In a country where nearly 50 percent of the population is unemployed, she said the jobs offered by the U.S. mili-

tary are a tremendous boost to the local people. Local workers keep the tent city spotless, fill wooden boxes with ice and bottles of water daily, and sweep up clouds of dust each evening along the sidewalk leading past the exchange, barber shop and local gift shop, also run by locals.

"If you really and truly asked [people] for shoes, more than 95 percent [of the people] would give you the shoes they're wearing," said Tech. Sgt. Ray Ortiz during a short drive to downtown Djibouti for some souvenir shopping. In addition to shopping, there are restaurants and a few popular night spots for dancing near the harbor. In this part of Djibouti, one can visualize a once modern city but one that has since grown worn and weary and in need of renovation. And for those looking to get further away from camp and city life, the base recreation office offers boat trips to local beaches and even scuba courses.

Sergeant Ortiz, who deployed from Tinker Air Force Base, Okla., said he enjoyed the hustle and bustle of the small but chaotic shopping area where serious bargaining is a must for souvenirs such as carved animal masks, soapstone dishes and colorful

African clothing. His bald head and friendly smile were instantly accepted and warmly greeted by the vendor of the stall he stopped at with his boss, 1st Lt. Mike Oldham from Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, N.C.

"The Djiboutians are happy we're here, and they look at us as friends," Sergeant Ortiz said.

"This is a good duty," the lieutenant said, especially compared with that undertaken by his counterparts in places such as Iraq where "bullets are flying." He was glad to have had the opportunity to work with Marines. "I've met some very impressive one's [Marines] over here."

That's the other facet of Djibouti that is unfamiliar territory for the approximately 50 Airmen who support the Africa mission. Although it usually takes a few days to become accustomed to the other's military rank, customs and courtesies, both parties seem to have gained a better understanding and respect for each other.

"It's definitely been a learning experience," Airman Balbach said of adapting to Marine culture that includes morning colors instead of reveille, evening colors in place of retreat, and obtaining a liberty pass at the quarterdeck before making a trip

to nearby Djibouti City.

The Airman laughed as she recalled trying to discern the rank of enlisted Marines and officers while walking around camp. But after a few friendly corrections, the new ranks became familiar, she said.

Other Airmen working alongside Marines spoke of the differences in addressing each other. Using first names isn't a common practice for Marines, but that too was only a minor adjustment for Airmen.

For Marine Cpl. Jenifer Altman, a data communications specialist working in an office with Air Force counterparts, working with her sister service has also been a pleasant eye-opening experience.

The 23-year-old from Brooksville, Fla., had never worked with Airmen and knew of the Air Force only from what she had heard from fellow Marines. The two cultures are different, but she's been impressed with the professional ability on the job and the close-knit relationship Airmen seem to share. She described it as a "family" atmosphere and has only enjoyed her time with them at Djibouti.

The feeling seems mutual among all parties here — Djiboutians, Airmen, Marines. 🦅

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## Djibouti at a glance

**Mission:** The purpose of the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa is to create a progressive regional partnership of nations in the Horn of Africa, founded on a mutual desire for cooperative security and stability, that overcomes and deters the threat of extremists who use terrorism to disrupt our way of life.

**Location:** Djibouti is a small country on the eastern coast of the African continent. It's bordered by Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, with Yemen across the Gulf of Aden.

**Getting around:** Flying is the easiest way to reach Djibouti. Ambouli International Airport is the only port of entry to Djibouti and is located within Djibouti City.

**Population:** Djibouti has a

population of approximately 560,000, with more than half of the population living in the capitol, Djibouti City. The majority of the population comes from the Somali and Afar tribes.

**History:** France first obtained a foothold in the region in 1862. French interest centered around Djibouti, the French commercial rival to Aden. By 1896 it was organized as a colony, and in 1946 it became a territory within the French Union. France officially recognized Djibouti's independence in 1977. Despite its attempts at peacemaking, Djibouti has been adversely affected by warfare in and between neighboring Ethiopia and Somalia. Moreover, beginning in 1991, tensions between Afars and the Issa-dominated government resulted in an Afar rebellion. A reconciliation agreement was reached in 1994, but the last remaining rebel group signed



a peace accord only in 2001. Djibouti was the base of operations for French forces during the Persian Gulf War, and the French maintains a strong military and technical presence. The United States also established a military presence in the nation beginning in 2002. In 2003, the government sought to expel an estimated 100,000 illegal immigrants, largely Ethiopians and Somalis, from the country. The move was prompted by security and unemployment concerns.

**Climate:** Djibouti is located in the sub-Saharan desert. Temperatures during the summer months can reach in excess of 120 degrees Fahrenheit, with the rainy season between the months of January and April.

**Economy:** Djibouti provides services as both a transit port for the region and an international trans-shipment and refueling center. It has few natural resources and little industry. The nation is, therefore, heavily dependent on foreign assistance to help support its balance of payments and to finance development projects. An unemployment rate of 50 percent continues to be a major problem. Inflation is not a concern, however, because of the fixed tie of the franc to the U.S. dollar.

**Education:** An estimated 67.9 percent of the Djiboutian population can read and write.

**Recreation:** The road from Djibouti to Ali Sabieh crosses two desert plains, Petit Bara and Grand Bara, and at the eastern end, you can go windsurfing on wheels. There are one or two hotels in town, and you can see several traditional Afar huts around town. Tadjoura's setting is picturesque, especially when viewed from the sea. Within 6 miles of town, there are several peaks that rise to more than 4,264 feet, and there are coral reefs accessible to snorkellers and divers close to shore.



**Djiboutian cars and trucks** aren't the only way the Hol Hol road is used. This Djiboutian family makes their way towards Djibouti City as heavy equipment operators from the 823rd Expeditionary RED HORSE Squadron level the road.

— Marine Sgt. Wayne Campbell